


Bishnupur



ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA



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BISHNUPUR

S.S. BISWAS

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BISHNUPUR

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

BISHNUPUR (LAT. 23° 05' N AND LONG. 87° 19' E), A SUB-divisional headquarters of Bankura district in West Bengal, is celebrated for a large number of beautiful temples, representing nearly all varieties of structural forms of medieval Bengali temple architecture. In the days of its glory, Bishnupur was the capital of a large territory known as Mallabhūm which comprised, besides the entire district of Bankura, an extensive area in the districts of Medinipur and Bardhaman. This region still retains a wide reputation as a living centre of folk crafts in terracotta, metal, silk, cotton-weaving and preserves a local style of classical music known as Bishnupur Gharāṇā. Though many of the temples were once in a state of decay, continuous undertaking of preservation carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India has put most of these in order and the recent arrangements made for illumination of some important monuments has turned the town into a centre of great tourist attraction. Walking along the banks of the large tanks known as *bāndhs*, the visitors get a view of the magnificence of temples, some of which have beautiful carvings on their walls offering a glimpse of the terracotta art of Bengal at a very high state of attainment.

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200 km by rail from Kolkata on the Howrah-Chakradharpur section of the South-Eastern Railway, Bishnupur can also be reached by road, the distance being 152 km along which there is a regular bus service from Kolkata. The Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal, maintains a Tourist Lodge here for the visitors. Accommodation is also available in a Guest House under the local Municipality and there are also quite a few hotels in the town.

The Archaeological Survey of India has published a folder in English and Bengali and a set of picture postcards about Bishnupur. Detailed information regarding Bishnupur is available from the Office of the Superintending Archaeologist, Archaeological Survey of India, Kolkata Circle, C.G.O. Complex, 4th Floor, Sector-I, Block-DF, Salt Lake City, Kolkata-700 064 and also from the local sub-office of the Survey at the Kālāchānd group of temples, Bishnupur.

This publication gives a brief account mainly of the temples of Bishnupur highlighting the features and characteristics of the respective structures, their stylistic variety and also about the terracotta ornamentations which deserve high appreciation. Walking along the banks of the *bāndhs* the visitors wonder at the sight of the massive temples having towering spires standing on the banks or near the *bāndhs* and their reflections mirrored in the still water of the *bāndhs*. Of these structures, particular mention may be made of the pyramidal Rāsa-mañcha, a structure, unique of its kind. Of the temples, the one known as Śyāma-rāya, built in the massive *pañcha-ratna* style, may be regarded as the most outstanding among all. In the area near the fort, stand several other temples such as the Joṛ-Bāṅglā, Rādhā-Śyāma, Lālji, Kṛishṇa-Balarāma, Nikuñjabihārī and Kesara-

GENERAL INFORMATION

rāya. Most of the remaining temples, like Kālāchānd, Rādhā-Mādhava, Rādhā-Govinda, Joṛ-Mandir, Nandalāla are located on the south and south-west banks of the big tank called Lāl-bāndh. In another area, to the north of the fort, stand the temples known as Madana-Mohana, Muralī-Mohana, Chinmayī, Madana-Gopāla and Malleśvara, while the distinctive Rāsa-mañcha stands gloriously alone, far to the south of the fort. Among these temples quite a few, such as, the Kālāchānd, Lālji, Madana-Gopāla, Rādhā-Mādhava, Rādhā-Govinda, Rādhā-Śyāma and Nandalāla are in laterite, the rest being in brick. Considering the form, structure and number of spires, the temples may be classified under five distinctive varieties. Of these the Malleśvara in its original form, the Kṛishṇa-Balarāma, Nikunjñabihārī and Kesara-rāya are of the *śikhara* type, while the rest are in the Bengali *ratna* type with one, five or nine towers. It is only in Bishnupur in the whole of West Bengal that such a concentration of temples in numbers and varieties can be found.

The visitors to Bishnupur may also visit local centres of toy-making and weaving. There are several other places of interest linked with the memory of noted musicians like Jadu Bhaṭṭa and Sanskrit scholars of wide reputation. The tourists may also make it convenient to visit some interesting monuments situated not far from Bishnupur, such as the large brick temple of Siddheśvara Mahādeva at Bahulara, an abandoned brick temple at Sonatopal, the stone-built shrines of Sāḍeśvara and Śaileśvara at Dihar and the big stone temple at Ekteśvara on way to Bankura. These edifices provide examples of traditional temple-architecture that was existing in Bengal during the medieval days.

Further, there are a few cannons to be found at Bishnupur

which bear witness to the military prowess of the Malla kings of bygone days. Of these, the largest one is known as the Dalmādal which is placed on a high base and offers a grand view.

2. HISTORY

NOTED FOR ITS ASSEMBLAGE OF A LARGE NUMBER OF temples of considerable grandeur and big tanks (pl. XVIII), Bishnupur still retains the flavour of an old Bengali urban complex which had witnessed great splendour and magnificence in the days of its power and glory.

The Mallas had been ruling over the area known after them as Mallabhūm from a very remote time as the dates in the records of these rulers reckoned in an era called the Malla era and founded in AD 695 would show. One Raghunātha, a scion of an old Kshatriya family who had gained distinction as Ādi Malla being the first among wrestlers for his physical prowess, is hailed as the founder of the kingdom. Bishnupur, however, rose into prominence from the time of Bīr Hambīr, the most renowned among the Malla rulers. He is considered to have been originally a very wicked and tyrannous ruler but was turned into a noble and benevolent potentate after his conversion to Vaishṇava cult by Śrīnivāsa, a follower of Śrī Chaitanya and a renowned scholar. Bīr Hambīr, who had virtually ruled as an independent chief, is stated to have introduced the worship of Madana-Mohana and had constructed the impressive Rāsa-mañcha, the quaint pyramidal structure at the centre of the town, where the images of all the deities from the neighbouring

temples are assembled on the occasion of the *rāsa* festival. Of the rulers succeeding Bīr Hambīr, Raghunātha, stated to be his son, had gained the title 'Singha' from Shāh Shuja, the Mughal Subedār of Rājmahal by displaying a feat of great courage by riding an extremely unmanageable horse.

Bishnupur acquired much glory as a centre of Sanskrit learning and classical music during the time of Raghunātha who is also credited to have built some impressive temples namely, the temple of Śyāma-rāya, Joṛ-bāṅglā and Kālāchānd. Raghunātha Singha was succeeded by his son Bīr Singha in about AD 1656. For proper security of his capital, Bīr Singha built a fort in Bishnupur, the ruins of which are to be found in the area known as Śāṅkhāripārā. He is reputed to have caused the excavation of eight immensely large tanks, locally known as *bāndhs* which considerably added to the scenic beauty of Bishnupur. He had made his mark as a temple-builder as well, having constructed seven temples within his territory. Of these, the Lālji temple at Bishnupur is a beautiful structure of the *eka-ratna* type. Two wives of Bīr Singha, Śīramaṇi and Chūḍāmaṇi by name, are held as the builders of two other impressive temples namely the Madana-Gopāla and Muralī-Mohana in AD 1665. Though credited as an enthusiastic builder, Bīr Singha is stated to have ordered his eight sons to be executed by walling them up alive for some unknown reason. The life of one of these sons, named Durjana Singha, was somehow saved and he succeeded Bīr Singha. Nothing much is heard about Durjana Singha except that he had caused

the erection of the temple of Madana-Mohana, the tutelary deity of the family of the Mallas in AD 1694.

Durjana Singha was succeeded by his son Raghunātha Singha II, during whose time the tradition of music in Bishnupur attained a great height. Raghunātha Singha fell in love with a Muslim woman of great beauty, Lāl Bāī by name. This attachment led Raghunātha to neglect grossly his royal duties and had even prompted him to get his subjects converted to Islam. These eventualities left everyone greatly infuriated against him. The eldest of the married spouses of the Rājā somehow succeeded in preventing such a development by putting him to death and had herself courted death by immolating herself in the funeral pyre of her husband and thus becoming a *satī*. This event led to her earning wide reputation as *pati-ghātinī-satī*, that is one who had become a *satī*, though she herself had killed her husband. Lāl Bāī is also stated to have died after the death of Raghunātha by entering the deep water of a nearby tank which acquired the name *Lāl-bāndh* after her death.

The death of Raghunātha was followed by evil days and decline of Bishnupur, the misfortunes of which having started with the raids by the Marathas and also the expansionist endeavours of the Zamindars of Bardhaman. Gopāla Singha, the immediate successor of Raghunātha Singha II had become a great devotee of Vaishṇavism and a legend holds that once when the town of Bishnupur was threatened by the Marathas, Gopāla Singha ordered his subjects to withdraw into

BISHNUPUR

the fort and fervently prayed to Madana-Mohana for deliverance from the danger. It is locally believed that as a consequence of this there occurred a great miracle. It was found that the cannon balls issuing from the Dalmādal cannon began to pour upon the Maratha army which was compelled to abandon the siege of Bishnupur and it was held that Madana-Mohana, the family deity of the Mallas, himself had operated the cannon to rout the Maratha force and thus save Bishnupur.

Gopāla Singha was succeeded by Kṛishṇa Singha and Kṛishṇa Singha by Chaitanya Singha. It was during the time of Chaitanya Singha that much tribulations were suffered by the Malla family and the estate was sold out in AD 1805 by the East India Company for arrears of land revenue and the Zamindars of Bardhaman acquired the estate through purchase. Thus came the final eclipse of the glory of the Malla tradition and the heydays of the splendour of Bishnupur.

3. ART AND ARCHITECTURE

THOUGH BISHNUPUR HAS LOST ITS REKNOWN AS the seat of powerful family of rulers, the opulence attained by the town still survives to a great extent in the monumental temples which are magnificent in their architectural style and the terracotta decoration found upon the walls of most of these temples, preserved in an excellent state.

There are about thirty noteworthy temples in Bishnupur, most of which are in a fairly well-preserved condition. Out of these, twenty temples are under protection of the Archaeological Survey of India which are described here.

A. ARCHITECTURE

From the point of style and structural formulation the temples of Bishnupur can be classified into different groups known to be of *deul*, *chālā* and *ratna* style. Besides these temples, one of the early structures at Bishnupur built by Bīr Hambīr and known as the Rāsa-mañcha is a formation quite unique of its kind. The temples belonging to the *deul* type are known as such since these are characterized by single tower bearing likeness to the north Indian variety of architecture known as the *Nāgara* order. Such temples abound in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and some other

parts of north India but are rare in Bengal. In Bankura district there exist two such temples, one at Bahulara and another at Sonatopal, both of which are widely known for their impressive character.

Temples of the *deul* type are rather few in Bishnupur, most of which are to be found in a dilapidated condition. The Mallaeśvara temple, built originally in laterite, had a tower of the *deul* type, but after many renovations it has totally lost its original character. Three other such temples, known as the Kṛishṇa-Balarāma, Kesara-rāya and Nikuñjabihāri, situated within the fort area are just ordinary structures of the *deul* type. The remaining temple structures are commonly characterized by style of architecture which had evolved in Bengal during the medieval time and has been known as the *Bāṅglā* style. The basic form of these structures conforms to the domestic architecture of the thatched hut, widely prevalent in Bengal. These are square or rectangular on ground-plan having roofs either sloping on two sides or on four sides, the latter variety being denominated as structures of the *chālā* type. Such *chālā* roof may be found superimposed by another such *chār-chālā*, at a little height above and such forms go by the name *āt-chālā*. Besides such *chālā* variety of temples there exists another variety in which can be found *śikhara* type of towers resembling spires having faceted sides and *āmalaka* finial. Such temples are generally called *ratna* type and are known as *eka-ratna*, *pañcha-ratna* or *nava-ratna* according to the number of towers, found superimposed upon the structure

below. The Rāsa-mañcha which was built by Bīr-Hambīr, however, happens to be a structure quite unique by itself. The structure with the ramifications of its different components, the arched galleries, the terrace around pyramidal elevation (truncated at the top) and the domed finial provide an architectural form quite unparalleled in the entire domain of temple architecture of Bengal.

B. ART

The structural forms of the temples at Bishnupur are quite beautiful to look at. The shapely towers rising upon the sloping roofs set against the open sky offer pictures of solemn beauty and elegance. Apart from being quite impressive from the architectural point of view, many of the temples are found richly decorated with ornamental carvings which add considerable grace and attractiveness to the temples. Such decorations are found upon the massive pillars holding the arched entrances of the temples, the architraves and the walls on either sides of such arched openings. These carvings may broadly be grouped in to two varieties. Some of these are to be found in panels, formed of elaborate linear patterns of geometric or ornamental nature, floral and vegetal patterns and motifs consisting of birds and animals of different varieties, or repetition of small shrines used as designs of decorative nature. The rest are to be found in panels mainly showing scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* or *Kṛishṇa-līlā* episodes. Besides such

panels, there can be found independent human figures, scenes representing day-to-day social life, hunting scenes, people riding horse or bullock-carts, or being carried in palanquins and the like. The temple of Śyāma-rāya, stated to have been built by Raghunātha Singha and dedicated to Rādhā and Kṛishṇa, is a temple of the *pañcha-ratna* style and may be regarded as the most outstanding because of the decorative engravings on its walls. In some other temples, such as the eight-roofed (*āṭ-chālā*) Khar Bāṅglā temple, ornamentation can be found upon the outer wall and inside the arched entrance as in case of the Madana-Mohana temple. In the Śyāma-rāya temple, however, the arched front wall, inner wall and the ceiling are all found decorated with ornamentation on an extensive scale

4. THE TEMPLES

THE TEMPLES OF BISHNUPUR MAINLY FOLLOW A STYLE exclusively developed in Bengal with a slight variation of north Indian type. Here there are also some *deul* type temples showing how the Bengal *sthapatis* had acquired considerable proficiency in erecting temples in different style.

A. MALLEŚVARA TEMPLE

Among the *deul* type of temples, the Malleśvara temple happens to be the earliest. Built by Raghunātha Singha in the year AD 1622, this temple was dedicated to Śiva. It is square on plan, each side measuring 6.9 m and 10.7 m in height. Originally the temple had a *rekhā śikhara* but the *śikhara* was replaced by an octagonal tower at a later stage. There are three other *deul* type temples with *śikhara* towers, namely Kṛishṇa-Balarāma, Kesara-rāya and Nikuñjabihārī temples, all of which are now in a state of dilapidation.

B. JOR-BĀŅGLĀ OR KESHTA-RĀYA TEMPLE

Mention may next be made of temples known as *Jor-bāṅglā* type. Two such temples are noticed at Bishnupur. One of these is called the Keshta-rāya and the other Mahāprabhu temple. The Keshta-rāya

temple (pl.I) is famous for its structural formation and exquisite terracotta art. The inscriptional record states that the temple was built by Raghunātha Singha in AD 1655. It is formed of two hut-type structures each having two sloping roofs, joined together to form a single temple, set up with a *chār-chālā* tower on the top. Facing south, the temple stands upon almost a square platform being 11.8 m in length and 11.7 m in breadth, and rises to a height of 10.7 m. This temple is found very extensively decorated with terracotta ornamentations upon the façade of the porch and all three sides. There is, however, no decoration on inner side of the tower of the temple, excepting a stucco figure representing Śrī Chaitanya in his *shadbhuja* (six-handed) form placed on a high pedestal against the back wall of the inner chamber. This image is not in worship at present. The decorations on the walls are arranged in panels made by vertical, horizontal and curved bands filled with plaques put up in rows. The main façade (pl.II) of the temple facing the south is shown decorated with panels divided by means of octagonal pilasters rising to full height on either sides of the three arched entrances, while above the entrance also exist such pilasters, less than half the height of the others, which are used to form panels arranged in groups of four. The raised wall-bands are found decorated with foliate ornaments, flowers, scroll works or lozenge-shaped ornaments shown on medallions or diamond-shaped patterns. Pilasters are partly octagonal in shape which are found richly decorated with figures of drummers and dancers. The



Jor-bānglā or Keshīa-rāya temple : general view. See p. 14

PLATE II



Jor-bānglā or Keshta-rāya temple : south façade. See p. 14



*Jor-bānglā or Keshṭa-rāya temple : Vāstraharaṇa episode of
Kṛishṇa-līlā. See p. 15*

PLATE IV



*Jor-bānglā or Keshṭa-rāya temple : Naukā-vilāsa episode of
Krishṇa-līlā. See p. 15*



Madana-Mohana temple : general view. See p. 17

PLATE VI



*Madana-Mohana temple : details of an arch and terracotta
decoration. See p. 17*

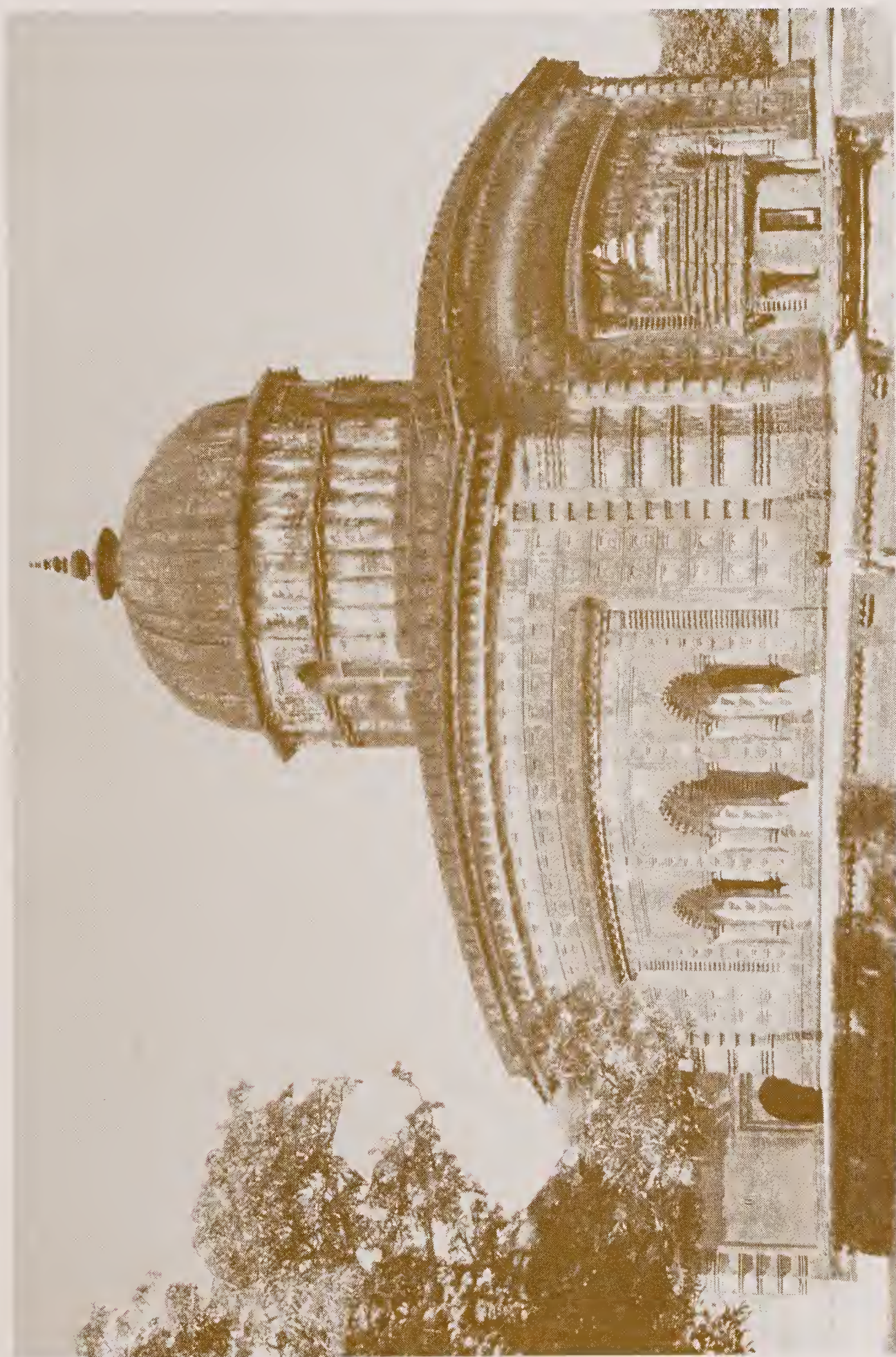


*Madana-mohana temple : panels showing hamsas and scene from
Krishna-lila. See p. 18*

PLATE VIII



*Jor-mandir group of temple (in the background) and
Rādhā-Govinda temple. See pp. 18-19*

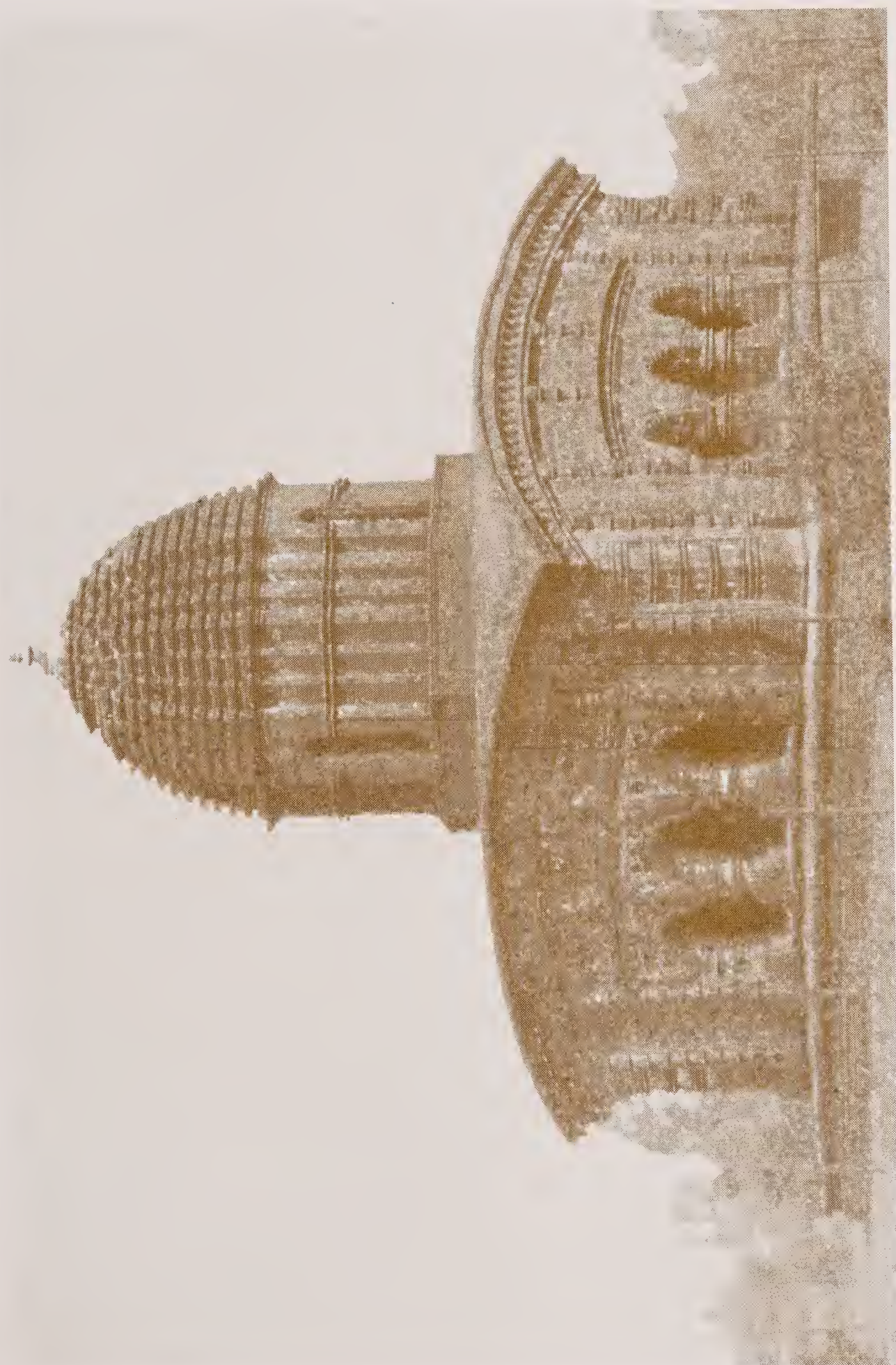


Rādhā-Śyāma temple : general view. See p. 20

PLATE X

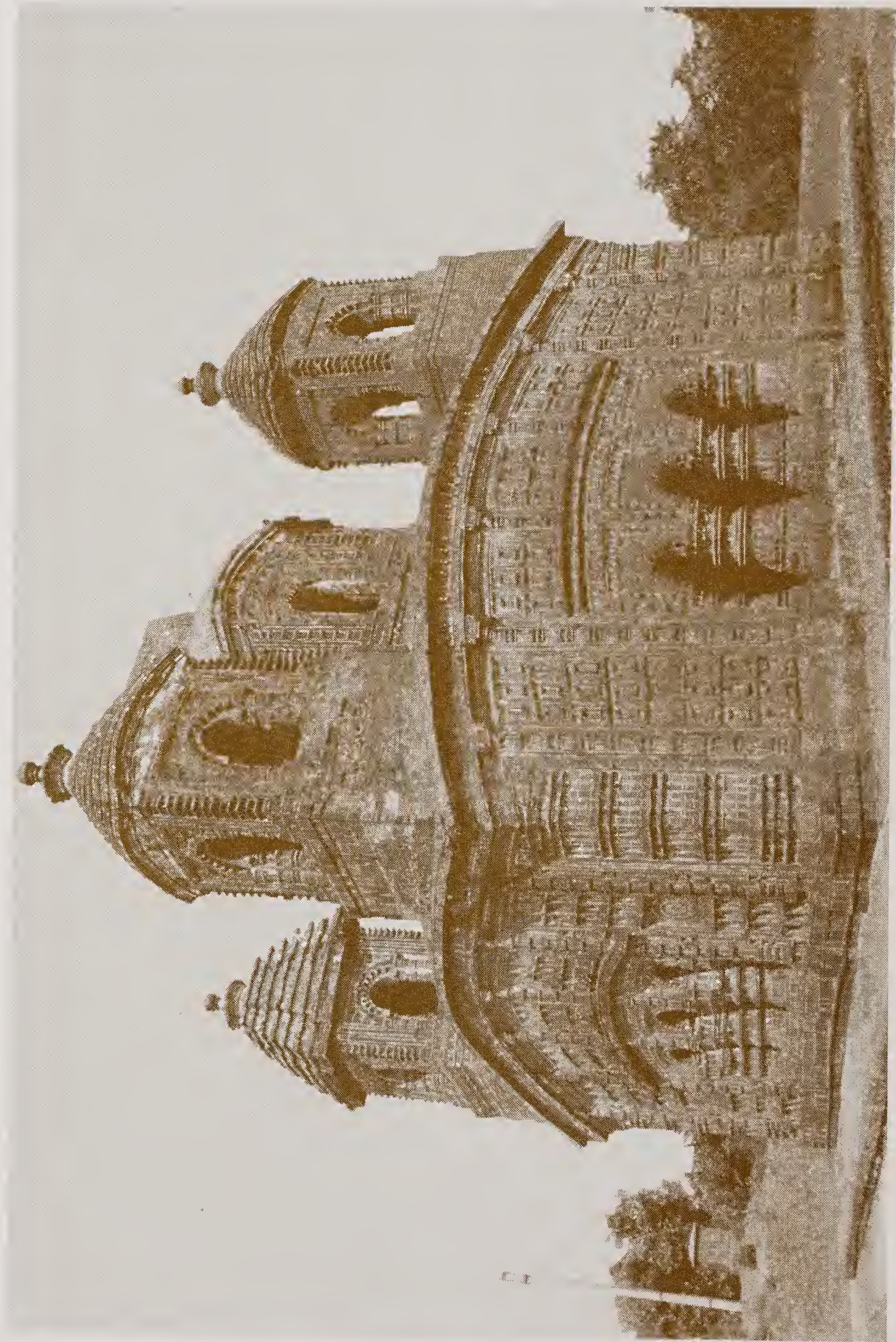


Rādhā-Śyām temple : Anantaśāyin Viṣṇu. See p. 21



Nandalāla temple : general view. See p. 21

PLATE XII



Śyāma-rāya temple : general view. See p. 22



Śyāma-rāya temple : façade of a porch. See p. 22

PLATE XIV



Śyāma-rāya temple : rāsamaṇḍala. See p. 23



*Śyām-rāya temple : Kṛishṇa-līlā and avatāras of
Vishṇu. See p. 23*

PLATE XVI



Śyāma-rāya temple : battle-scenes. See p. 24

panels depict subjects of very wide variety of scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, episodes of *Kṛishṇa-līlā* (pls. III and IV), scenes showing semi-divine beings like the *kinnaras* and the *gandharvas*, hunting-scenes, scenes from social life and the like, revealing imagination in its widest extravagance, showing movements and action of dynamic nature. From the richness of ornamental decoration and the quality of their workmanship, this *Keshṭa-rāya* (Joṛ-bāṅglā) temple can be held as the finest among the temples of Bishnupur.

The other Joṛ-bāṅglā temple, namely the *Mahāprabhu* temple, is of the very same type as the *Keshṭa-rāya* temple but at present it is in a dilapidated condition. It may be datable to AD 1734–35 when *Gopāla Singha* was the ruler.

C. KĀLĀCHĀND TEMPLE

The largest number of temples at Bishnupur is of the *eka-ratna* type each having a single tower set upon a sloping roof and a square cell below. Twelve such temples are still surviving in Bishnupur, of which two are made of brick and the rest are of laterite. The earliest of the *eka-ratna* temples is the *Kālāchānd* temple (in laterite) which was built in AD 1656 by *Raghunātha Singha* on the south bank of the *Lāl-bāndh*. The temple is about 11.1 m square on plan and 9.2 m in height. The south-facing *Kālāchānd* temple stands with corridor around, with three arched openings on all four sides. The roof of the temple is curved, upon which the

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śikhara rises upwards and ends with an *āmalaka* on the top. The temple is decorated with low relief carvings and the main subject is Kṛishṇa-*līlā*. Apart from Kṛishṇa-*līlā* scenes there are also representations of Paurānic deities, ascetics and dancers.

D. LĀLJI TEMPLE

Among the stone-built *eka-ratna* temple, the Lālji temple has a very impressive appearance. This temple is enclosed by a covered ambulatory and a few ornamental details are visible on the sides of the three arched openings. It is known from the inscriptional record that this temple was built by Bīr Singha II. in AD 1658 for the pleasure of “Śrī Rādhikā and Śrī Kṛishṇa”. Placed upon a large plinth, the temple is a structure of square shape having a roof slightly sloping on all the four sides, upon which stands the single tower. It is square on plan each side being 12.3 m in height. The temple had ornamental decorations upon its front wall originally, but now only traces of those ornamentations can be seen on the upper part of the arched openings.

E. MURALI-MOHANA TEMPLE

Of the *eka-ratna* type, the next temple is the Muralī-Mohana temple which stands facing the south and shows some difference from other *eka-ratna* group of temples. Here the three arched openings are found replaced by a covered ambulatory resting on a row of pillars and the inner sanctum is topped by a tower. The

THE TEMPLE

temple is about 10.1 square m on plan and 12.2 m in height. On the temple there exists an insignia or the *dhvaja* standing above what is called the *chuḍā*, indicating which deity has been installed within. This temple was built by Rānī Chuḍāmaṇidevī, wife of Bīr Singha in AD 1665.

F. MADANA-MOHANA TEMPLE

Of the *eka-ratna* variety, the temple of Madana-Mohana (pl.V) is built in brick. This temple was erected to enshrine the tutelary deity of the Mallas. Among the brick-built *ekā-ratna* shrines the Madana-Mohana temple is unique of its type. The Malla king Durjana Singha had built this temple in AD 1694. This south facing temple is 12.2 square m on plan and 10.7 m in height. The structure is placed on a large plinth, made of laterite. The temple is much celebrated for the ornamentations which embellish the walls of this temple. The ornamentations are mainly on terracotta plaques set upon the wall. The temple has a covered porch with three arched openings on the east, south and west sides. It has a single tower on a sloping roof. The façade of the temple has scenes showing Kṛishṇa-līlā episodes, scenes showing dancers and dancing party and a row of ascetics. On the other three sides, elaborate ornamentations are met with upon the sides of the arches which are fitted with plaques with figures enclosed by very rich floral ornamentations. The area resting upon the arches are found covered with scenes depicting war (pl.VI) while the lower

panels are found decorated with figures of animals and birds (pl.VII), Kṛishṇa-līlā, Daśāvatāra scenes, legends and stories from the *Purāṇas*. The pillars display groups of figures engaged in dancing and singing and the arched façades are found filled with battle-scenes from the *Mahābhārata*. The interior part of the temple-porch is also decorated, showing a few dragon-like animals.

G. JOṚ-MANDIR GROUP OF TEMPLES

In close proximity to the Lāl-bāndh stand two big and one small temples, the entire complex being known as Joṛ-Mandir (pl.VIII). These were built in AD 1726 by Gopāla Singha. Among the Joṛ-Mandir group of temples, the two on the south and north are a little larger than the one at middle. The temple, which is situated in the centre, is decorated with extensive and elaborate ornamentations. There are stucco figures on the laterite wall. The subject of the detailed ornamentation in laterite are mostly illustrations from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and also Kṛishṇa-līlā. This temple on plan is like other *eka-ratna* temples. Another temple which is situated on the northern side also has on its walls some ornamentations of interesting nature. The temple on the north side is square on plan, each side measuring 11.7 m and 12.2 m in height, the middle one is square on plan each side being 7 m and 7.6 m in height and the temple on the south side is about 11.8 square m on plan and 12.2 m in height.

THE TEMPLE

H. RĀDHĀ-GOVINDA TEMPLE

The Rādhā-Govinda temple (pl. VIII) is also situated in the vicinity of the Lāl-bāndh. The temple is square on plan each side measuring 12.4 m and has a curved roof above surmounted by a tower on the top. The height of the temple is 10.7 m. There is a porch in front of the sanctum with three arched openings on three sides. The entire front wall and the wall beneath the cornice are embellished with bas-relief decorations made in individual blocks. This temple was built in AD 1729 during the time of Kṛishṇa Singha.

I. RĀDHĀ-MĀDHAVA TEMPLE

Belonging to the group of temples located to the south of the Lāl-bāndh stands the impressive Rādhā-Mādhava temple which is a structure of the *eka-ratna* type. This temple was built by Śīramaṇīdevī in AD 1737, one of the consorts of Bīr Singha. It is square on plan with each side measuring about 11.1 m and 9.2 m in height. The entrance into the temple has three arches on the wall of the porch. Parallel to the plinth can be found rows of birds and animals and Pauranic episodes shown carved in a very graceful manner. On the side wall and the lower part of the cornice exist elaborate sculptural reliefs shown in two rows. The area by the side of the arches and the pillars are also embellished with relief decoration dealing with various themes. The major area of these decorations is filled with scenes showing the Kṛishṇa-

līlā episodes. Other decorations show *Daśāvatāra* panels and floral ornamentation. Amidst the temples belonging to this complex there is a *do-chālā-maṇḍapa* situated near the Rādhā-Mādhava temple. This structure is known as the *bhoga-maṇḍapa*. This *do-chālā bhoga-maṇḍapa* is unique of its type in Bishnupur, since no other *do-chālā* structure is to be found here.

J. RADHĀ-ŚYĀMA TEMPLE

Situated a little to the south of Lālji temple stands the Rādhā-Śyāma temple (pl.IX). Built in laterite, the temple stands within a large enclosed courtyard. The dedicatory inscription of this temple gives the date of its erection in the year AD 1758. Built by the Malla ruler Chaitanya Singha, this temple is the latest of the dated temples in Bishnupur. Though built in laterite, this temple is noted for its stucco relief. Built on a square plan the temple has a curved roof with a single tower above. This south-facing temple is square on plan, each side measuring 12.5 m and is 10.7 m in height. The shape of the tower here is a little different from the towers met in other temples. The lime plaster known as *paṅkha* applied to cover the laterite walls reveal decoration of a very elaborate nature. The decorations include geometric and floral motifs of exquisite workmanship. There can be found two rows of stucco figures set up within square blocks fixed along the side walls and the lower part of the cornice. A row of similar decoration can also be noticed along the sides of the three arched openings. The inner portion

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of the three arched porches are also decorated. The front wall of the sanctum is found decorated with scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Anantaśāyin Viṣṇu (pl.X) and widely recurring figures of Rādhā-Kṛishṇa. This temple is quite large and images from all the temples which are now deserted or in dilapidated state are housed in the sanctum of this temple where these are worshipped simultaneously with the main *vigraha* or Kṛishṇa with Rādhā called Rādhā-Śyāma.

K. NANDALĀLA TEMPLE

Situated to the north of the Lāl-bāndh and facing south, the Nandalāla temple (pl.XI) is built of laterite. It has a square ground plan and a single tower resting upon the curved roof. This temple does not bear any dated inscription but from the style and formation it appears to have been built some time during the seventeenth century AD. Each side of the temple measures 10.2 m and is 9.2 m in height. The ornamentations in this temple can be seen only on the space found by the sides of the three arched openings.

L. PATPUR TEMPLE

At a place on the eastern side of Kṛishṇa-bāndh there exists another *eka-ratna* temple known as Pātpur built of laterite. The temple does not bear any inscription giving either the date of the temple or the name of its builder. On the basis of the form and character, it appears to have been built during the second half of

the eighteenth century. On either side of the entrance-door of this temple are found two beautiful images of Viṣṇu.

M. ŚYĀMA-RĀYA TEMPLE

After the appraisal of the temples of the *eka-ratna* variety, attention may be drawn to the temples of the *pañcha-ratna* type, some examples of which existing in Bishnupur could be regarded as accomplishments of high order. Of these, the temple of Śyāma-rāya (pl.XII) built by Raghunātha Singha in AD 1643, can be held as the most outstanding among the temples of Bishnupur for its structural set-up and elaborate terracotta ornamentations which are of very high quality. Built entirely in brick, the temple is quite massive in shape and proportion and is square on plan having Bengali *chār-chālā* roof. Each side of the temple measures about 11.4 m and is 10.7 m in height. Above the roof which slopes on four sides in Bengali *chār-chālā* type with towers of *śikhara* variety, four of which stand on four corners and a tall one rises at the centre. Because of these five towers, commonly termed as *ratna-chudā*, the temple is considered to be belonging to the *pañcha-ratna* class. On each of the four sides of the temple is a porch showing three arches for entrance (pl.XIII). This temple is famous for its highly ornamental decorations in terracotta which are to be found all over the temple, both inside and outside on the four walls around, on the areas by the sides and below each of the arches and also on the towers placed

above the roof. An inscription placed on the main entrance of the temple states that this temple was “built for the pleasure of Śrī Rādhikā and Śrī Kṛishṇa”. Besides, a very rich profusion of beautiful floral designs, the decorations reveal a wide variety of subjects, of which Kṛishṇa-*līlā* scenes occupy the position of highest prominence. Of these Kṛishṇa-*līlā* panels showing the *rāsa-maṇḍala* (pl.XIV) and other episodes (pl.XV) accommodated within circular panels are held as works of high artistic skill. There are also scenes of social life, episodes from Paurāṇic literature, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* and stories from Śaiva or Śākta legends. Extensive designs of geometric and floral patterns have also been found in profusion in this temple. The principal panels of the façade illustrate a wide variety of themes drawn from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Kṛishṇa-*līlā* stories in extensive detail. In the Śyāma-rāya temple double sets of square panels are used to appear as a frame on three sides of the entrance and separate the principal panels above the arches. The panels in the frame have several scenes showing Kṛishṇa with attendant figures. The columns are decorated with plaques showing figures of Kṛishṇa and Rādhā and also a large number of other figures, both male and female, shown engaged in dancing and singing. There are also panels with scroll-work and Kṛishṇa-Rādhā figures as well as musicians and dancers appearing as if placed together, in panels of different shape, above the arches and beneath the canopies. The cornices are carved with friezes showing musicians and lively dancers. This temple has the most

prolific interior ornamentation shown on ceiling of the central sanctuary and the pavilion above bearing concentric rows of female dancers and drummers. A number of such figures also appear on the supporting pendentives, squinches and arches, as well as beneath the vaults of the porches. Rows of similar figures also line the wall, together with recurring motifs such as trees with birds, animals with female attendants in devotional attitudes. On the back wall of the shrine chamber can be found a very large circular medallion showing Kṛishṇa at the centre surrounded by two rings of dancing *gopīs* around. This beautifully executed medallion has earned a wide acclaim as an extremely well-formulated artistic creation showing the *rāsa-maṇḍala* scene. The interior doorways lead from the porch to another along narrow passages through the corner chambers. The doorways display many of the features of the external arched entrances, but the panels fixed above these doorways are slightly different from those found on the arches. The porch doorways have panels showing vigorous battle scenes (pl.XVI). Decorated friezes at the base in each of the porches are found arranged in three layers, which show hunting and pastoral scenes executed in elaborate details. All these decorative and narrative scenes have endowed the Śyāma-rāya temple with a beauty and charm of unsurpassable nature and have gained for it popularity far beyond any other temple to be found, not only in Bishnupur but the whole of Bengal.

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N. MADANA-GOPĀLA TEMPLE

Next to the Śyāma-rāya temple mention may be made of the Madana-Gopāla temple, another temple of the *pañcha-ratna* type but built entirely of laterite. This temple was set up by Śīramaṇidevī, the wife of Rājā Bīr Singha II in the year 1665. It is 11.3 m square on plan and 13.7 m in height. The structure has five *śikharas* superimposed upon a curved roof and the only *pañcha-ratna* temple built in laterite in Bishnupur. The tower placed at the centre is octagonal in shape, while the four towers at four corners are square in shape with stepped character of *pīḍā* type. This temple is rather scantily decorated. Only some lotus ornamentations are found above the arches of the porch. Very sturdily built, this temple has a character of its own, quite different from the other big temples of Bishnupur.

O. ŚRĪDHARA TEMPLE

There is only a single example of the *nava-ratna* variety known as Śrīdhara temple at Bishnupur. Built by a member of the local Basu family, this is the only monument in Bishnupur which does not owe its origin to the munificence of any person belonging to the Malla family. It is almost square on plan with each side measuring 5.3 m and 10.4 m in height. Facing east, the temple has four porches on four sides, on which there are three arches each on each side facing south, east and north while the porch on the west is like an open

corridor. The roof of the porches is vaulted, while the inner sanctum is topped by a roof. The terracotta panels here are found to include the usual subjects popular at Bishnupur, such as scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛishṇa-*līlā* episodes and the like. In some of these panels are shown foreign soldiers holding guns.

P. RĀDHĀ-VINODA TEMPLE

In Bishnupur, there are only two *āt-chālā* temples which are situated in the Khar Bāṅglā area. Of these, the east facing Rādhā-Vinoda temple claims a position of great interest though the front portion of the upper part of the *āt-chālā* roof and the entrance wall have totally collapsed. In the *āt-chālā* temple at Bishnupur, the break between the upper and lower sets of *chālā* happens to be very narrow which gives an almost *chār-chālā* appearance to the temples. This richly-decorated temple was built in AD 1659 by the wife of Raghunātha Singha. Facing east, the temple stands upon almost a square plinth being 6.4 m in length and 6.2 m in breadth and rises to a height measuring 10.7 m.

Q. RĀDHĀ-RAMAṆA TEMPLE

The other *āt-chālā* temple is Rādhā Ramaṇa by name, also situated in this Khar Bāṅglā area. This unpretentious plain brick structure is now abandoned.

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R. RASA-MAÑCHA

Besides these temples which are of abiding interest there exists another structure of quaint beauty and structural formulation, which is held as a monument of a unique character. The Rāsa-mañcha with a pyramidal roof placed upon a spacious laterite plinth was built by Bīr Hambīr in AD 1600. The sanctum of the shrine is enclosed by three successive circumambulatory galleries and crowned by a massive pyramidal roof above. Placed upon a square plinth, 1.5 m high, each side of it measures 24.5 m long and rises to a height of about 10.7 m to reach a flat roof above. The outer arches of the enclosing galleries are decorated with terracotta lotus motifs and in the eastern side wall there are panels showing dancers and singers. The place was used during the reign of the Malla rulers as the centre where every image, large or small was brought from all the neighbouring shrines and temples to be arranged for their display to the public at the time of the celebration of the *Rāsa* festival. Now-a-days this place is no longer used for this purpose any more. From structural formation the Rāsa-mañcha is held as unique, having no similar structure anywhere, not only in Bengal but in the whole of India. It may be regarded as the pride of Bishnupur.

S. THE BĀNDHS

The epithet Malla of the rulers of Bishnupur and a wide forest covered area around Bishnupur under the

control of the Malla rulers came to be known as Mallabhūm. They had built a large fort in this town and dug up a number of big tanks. Many beautiful temples were erected by them not only in Bishnupur but also in several other places within this territory. These tanks in Bishnupur are known as *bāndhs*. The *bāndhs* were excavated mainly for the relief of the people from shortage of water supply and were also to some extent used for strengthening the defence of the fort. Most of these *bāndhs* were dug between AD 1657 and 1677 by the Malla ruler Bīr Singha. These tanks are popularly known as the Lāl-bāndh, the Kṛishṇa-bāndh, the Gantāt-bāndh, the Jamunā-bāndh, the Kālindī-bāndh, the Śyāma-bāndh, the Pokā-bāndh (Bīr-bāndh) and the Chowkhan-bāndh. Apart from the Chowkhan-bāndh, which is now almost dry, all the other tanks are still in a glorious state of existence. These *bāndhs* were set up to surround an area within which was the fort including the royal palace with high walls and moat around. Most of the distinguished temples of Bishnupur viz., the Kālāchānd temple, the Rādhā-Govinda temple, the Nandalāla temple and the Rādhā-Mādhava temple are found situated along the south bank of the Lāl-bāndh while the Pāṭpur temple stands on the bank of the Kṛishṇa-bāndh.

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MAP OF BISHNUPUR DISTRICT BANKURA, WEST BENGAL

(SHOWING PROTECTED MONUMENTS)



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METRES

